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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 07 ADDIS ABABA 000302

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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y - CORRECTING TEXT FORMAT

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT OF AF/E
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA'S MUSLIM COMMUNITY: FIGHTING TO PRESERVE
TOLERANCE

REF: A. ADDIS ABABA 03123
[1](#)B. ADDIS ABABA 02352
[1](#)C. ADDIS ABABA 02911

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Classified By: P/E Counselor Kevin Sullivan for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Ethiopia's recent military incursion into Muslim Somalia, combined with several widely-reported earlier incidents of Christian-Muslim violence in the rural areas, have prompted quiet discussions among Muslims and Christians alike about whether or not Ethiopia's much vaunted religious tolerance is under siege. Generally, observers comment that the recent Muslim-Christian incidents are not unprecedented, but are greater in scope and number than seen in the past. Both communities seem determined to characterize events as isolated and atypical while simultaneously quietly worrying that they might portend a new and more confrontational trend. Conversations with Ethiopian Muslims on several key issues suggest that while the Muslim community has a number of specific complaints, it remains generally supportive of the ruling EPRDF and does not feel oppressed by Ethiopia's dominant Christian culture. Nor do Ethiopian Muslims generally respond to international calls for extremist action. Many Muslims do have problems with their own formal leadership in Islamic Councils, however--a situation which has deprived the community of a strong, authoritative voice during difficult times. Past GOE political intervention in the Islamic leadership elections has helped slow the advance of Salafist influences, but new leadership may be required over the coming year to sustain this trend.
END SUMMARY

BACKGROUND: ISLAM BIFURCATED BY OTHER IDENTITIES AND INTERESTS

[1](#)2. (C) Approximately one-half of Ethiopia's population practices Islam with Muslims heavily represented in several of the country's main ethnic groups. In the Somali Region, virtually the entire population is Muslim as is the relatively small population of remote Afar Region. Perhaps half of the Oromos -- the country's largest ethnic group -- practice Islam, as do approximately half of the smaller ethnic Gurage population. Each of these groups speaks its own language and many have limited contact with Ethiopians outside their ethnic group. Further, among some groups, broader ethnic interests, such as pan-Oromo political aspirations, trump religious identity. Finally, while Muslims are heavily represented in the business sector, many Muslims, particularly in Afar and Somali Regions, are traditional pastoralists. Consequently any attempt to discuss "Muslim" interests and concerns must acknowledge this diversity.

13. (C) Muslims have traditionally relied on the elected

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national, regional, and sub-regional Islamic Affairs councils to manage the interests of the Muslim community, to include appointment of imams at all mosques, coordination of hajj travel, and promotion of Islamic education. The regional Islamic Affairs councils report to the national-level Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC). In theory, these regional Islamic Affairs councils and the EIASC speak for the community. However, in practice, the Islamic Councils have a mixed record, particularly the EIASC. Anecdotally, Muslims from several of Ethiopia's regions complain about their regional councils being either too political (i.e. pro-regime), too "Wahabi" (i.e. Salafist), or simply inept.

14. (C) The EIASC, particularly its Deputy Chairman, Sheikh Elias Redman comes under fire from large numbers of Muslims. In Addis Ababa, positive comments about Redman and the EIASC are infrequent. Most commonly, Muslims complain the EIASC is a "do-nothing" organization which neither energetically promotes Muslims interests nor conducts activities beneficial to the community (such as organizing required acts of charity, sponsoring events during important Muslim holidays, encouraging dialog between Muslims, etc.) Many Muslims believe that the sole activity the EIASC undertakes is coordination of hajj travel to Makkah and others make additional unspecified charges of corruption and misbehavior against Redman and the EIASC.

15. (C) Hajj travel itself has become a sore subject among Muslims who believe that the EIASC has, through ineptitude, raised barriers to hajj travel. In a small scandal during the recent fall hajj season, the Saudi government denied large numbers of Ethiopians hajj visas.

Ethiopian applicants pre-paid to the EIASC thousands of birr for their visas and travel; when the Saudi government rejected the visas, the EIASC returned the pre-payments minus a 500 birr (approximately 60 U.S. dollars) administrative fee. At least 10,000 Muslims were likely affected by visa denials, fueling the belief among Muslims that the EIASC made an enormous profit from the situation, with many Muslims believing that EIASC members, particularly Redman personally pocketed the money. (Comment: Criticisms about Saudi hajj policies exist throughout the Muslim world. Many Ethiopian Muslims seeking better economic prospects illegally overstay their hajj visas and others do not meet eligibility requirements, resulting in a high rate of visa denial.

Sheikh Redman asserts that the unusually large number of denied hajj visas in 2006 represents Saudi retaliation for the EIASC's energetic efforts to combat Saudi-sponsored Salafism.)

16. (C) For these reasons, the EIASC is, at best, irrelevant to many Muslims and, at worst, a barrier to greater community identification.

The next elections for EIASC positions will occur in late 2007 or early 2008 but it is unclear if widespread dissatisfaction with the current

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membership will result in the election of more energized and popular leaders. In the 2003-2004 EIASC elections, the GOE's dissatisfaction with the composition of the Council (due to Salafist influence; see below for further analysis) resulted in behind-the-scenes efforts by the government to advance the candidacy of many of the EIASC's current members. Such GOE "lobbying" could occur again in the next election if the government perceives that Salafists may ascend to the EIASC.

AMBIVALENCE, LINGERING LOYALTY TO EPRDF REGIME

18. (C) Muslims of all stripes positively contrast the ruling EPRDF party's policies toward Islam with previous practices under Emperor Haile Selassie and under the Marxist Derg regime, recalling discrimination by Emperor Selassie and his comment that Ethiopia "is a Christian island in a Muslim sea." Under the Derg, Muslim holy days such as Eid became national holidays, but many Muslims believe that the EPRDF represented the first attempt by an Ethiopian government to fully

integrate Muslims into society and the government. An "unprecedented" number of Muslims (4 of 20) hold ministerial positions in the national government and the EPRDF has assiduously courted the Muslim vote. Many Muslims speaking to Mission personnel do not articulate a specific set of "pro-Muslim" policies or actions taken by the EPRDF but appear to speak more broadly and instinctively that they "feel" less marginalized by this government than by previous ones.

¶9. (C) Muslims did not play a central role during the period of the contentious May 2005 national elections and aftermath and remain somewhat outside the line of conflict between the EPRDF and opposition party, Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD). Some observers note that CUD's pro-business stance appealed to Muslims businessmen, especially Gurages, hence some significant Muslim support for the opposition existed. However, many Muslims quickly point to the Amhara character of the CUD, likening it to Emperor Selassie and the DERG, and expressing considerable skepticism that the party could represent Muslims. Further, some Muslims harbor suspicions about the timing of the November 2006 violent protests against the government which occurred over Eid--the most important Muslim holiday. Despite indications that the protests were largely spontaneous, members of the Muslim community point to earlier CUD calls for civil protest (to begin after Eid) as proof that the CUD does not respect Islam. Thus, Muslims appear to largely believe that they do not have a dog in the EPRDF-CUD fight and that the EPRDF is better than the other alternatives.

MUSLIM BROTHERS, SOMALIA, AND THE ABSENCE OF WIDESPREAD PAN-ISLAMIC FEELINGS

¶10. (C) Unlike many Muslims worldwide, Ethiopians do not appear to hol

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well-developed feelings of pan-Islamic identification or loyalty. They proudly note Ethiopia's historical importance in Islam. However, Ethiopian Muslims do not closely track or identify with traditional hot-button issues for Muslims worldwide, such as the Palestinian cause, or allegations of attacks on Islam worldwide. For example, the Danish cartoon controversy caused little visible reaction among Ethiopian Muslims although various organizations did draft formal letters of objection, etc. Rising sentiment elsewhere that the U.S. is conducting a "crusade" against Muslims has not yet appeared in Ethiopia, suggesting that the population remains insulated from common Islamic issues worldwide.

¶11. (C) In some fora, Ethiopia's conflict with Somalia is described as a Christian (and proxy U.S.) invasion of a Muslim state. However, the bifurcation of Ethiopian Muslim identity makes assessing reaction to the incursion difficult. First, many Ethiopians, including Muslims, harbor a number of prejudices against ethnic Somalis, particularly that Somalis are violent, criminally inclined, and dangerous (also powerful fighters). This prejudice, combined with the absence of a strong pan-Islamic identity mitigates Ethiopian Muslim empathy for their "brother Muslims" although undoubtedly some empathy exists, particularly among young men. Further, several wars and multiple smaller conflicts between the two states contribute to a feeling that Somalia and Ethiopia share few interests. Law enforcement personnel have confidently expressed their belief that the Ethiopian population -- presumably including some Muslims -- is a powerful ally in efforts to combat potential Somali terrorist or conventional attacks in Ethiopia because Ethiopians would quickly report any "suspicious" behavior by Somalis.

¶12. (C) Among Ethiopian ethnic Somalis -- a group of some five million persons -- whether residents of Ethiopia's Somali Region or refugees from Somalia itself, identification with Somalia is powerful. Residents of Somali Region have relatives on both sides of the border, frequently cross back and forth, and self-identify as members of specific Somali clans, rather than as "Ethiopians" per se. Decades of economic and political neglect -- though less now than under previous regimes -- and the extreme physical isolation of the region contribute to Somali Region inhabitants' sense that events in Addis Ababa have little relevance for them. Whether or not ethnic Somalis outside of the Somali Region would act as an Ethiopian fifth column in the event of a protracted Ethiopian presence in Somalia is unknown; to date, neither the GOE nor Post have detected evidence of anti-government activity by ethnic Somalis in Addis. The armed Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), with

pan-Somali aspirations, has conducted a number of raids on Ethiopian forces in the Somali Region, however.

WAHABIS AND CREEPING SALAFIST VIEWS THROUGHOUT ETHIOPIA

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¶13. (C) Over the last decade, Salafist (locally called Wahabist) and other "fundamentalist" Islamic philosophies have emerged in Ethiopia and challenged the views of traditionally Sufi Muslim communities, primarily due to large infusions of Saudi cash into Saudi and local NGO's and religious organizations. Salafists built mosques, taught conservative interpretations of the Quran, and aggressively advocated Saudi-style religio-social norms (such as veiling for women and non-observance of certain important religious holidays), resulting in dramatic visible changes. For example, in Afar Region, women who used to wear traditional clothing with their breasts exposed have now adopted extreme veiling, including heavy cloth covering the face. Locals ceased observing the Prophet's Birthday and accepted condemnation of their previous practices as anti-Islamic.

¶14. (C) After 9/11, greater Ethiopian and Saudi monitoring of Islamic funds and activities reduced the influence and reach of Salafists. However, social norms, such as veiling, continue and -- in the absence of much traditional Sufi teaching in the rural areas -- vestiges of the Salafist Islamic message remain. EAIAC Deputy Chairman Elias Redman maintains that Salafist influence continues unabated, aggressively encouraged by the Saudi Embassy. Within Addis Ababa and large cities, Salafists have also gained influence, controlling some of the mosques from which they propagate their views. That said, Salafism's strength seems to vary from community to community. Different Mission contacts hold varying views of the size, influence, and threat of these groups (Refs A and B), but agree that their influence has not fully waned. Separately, sects of the radical Al-Takfir Wa Al-Hijra (Excommunication and Exile) group have also appeared in Ethiopia, particularly along the Sudanese border but also in major cities, including Addis Ababa. The absence of a clear organizing ideology and diverse nature of Al-Takfir groups makes it difficult to characterize exactly what they stand for in the Ethiopian context. Nonetheless, Al-Takfir groups have advocated extreme, conservative forms of Islam, "excommunicated" large numbers of Muslims in their areas, and clashed with competing local Salafist groups. Their influence appears less than Saudi-style Salafist influence.

¶15. (C) What do "Wahabis" say about themselves? Many Salafists downplay their differences with Sufis. One prominent Salafist dismissed the label "Wahabi", calling it a loaded political term used by the EAIAC, and particularly Sheikh Redman, against anyone they perceive as a threat. He claimed -- somewhat disingenuously -- that the religious differences between the Salafists and Sufis were minor doctrinal details. Salafists also unfavorably compare the current EAIAC's religio-academic credentials to those of the previous EAIAC, reflecting frustration with their marginalization from Islamic institutions. Initially, during the early 2000's, Salafists gained increasing control over the EAIAC and the

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regional and sub-regional Islamic Councils. Islamic Councils in Addis Ababa, in portions of Oromiya Region and Amhara Region, and even the EAIAC, appointed Salafist Imams and licensed Salafist-oriented NGOs, schools, and religious madrassas (many with ties to Saudi Arabia). In response, the GOE quietly exerted pressure to ensure that traditional Sufis replaced the Salafists during the 2003-2004 election cycle for the Islamic Councils. Since then, Salafists have lacked sufficient footholds within the official Islamic organs to institutionally advance their views, putting many of their activities below the radar.

¶16. (C) So-called Wahabis, however, do not eschew contact with the Mission. During the October-November 2006 Ramadan season, Post hosted its annual Iftar dinner for prominent Ethiopian Muslims, attempting to reach out to a broad cross-section of Muslims in the public and private sector and in religious institutions. EAIAC Deputy Chairman Redman

complained about some of the attendees, characterizing many of them as "Wahabis." While Post does not necessarily share Redman's overbroad characterization of the guest list, conservative and Salafist Muslims did attend and engaged Mission personnel, suggesting that at least some elements of this group do not support the hostile and isolationist attitude toward Americans found among many conservative Islamist groups worldwide.

CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIFFERENCES - GROWING STRESS POINTS BUT CONTINUED GOOD RELATIONS

¶20. (C) Both Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia take great pride in the historically good relations between the two communities, consistently noting that they live with affection and tolerance for their neighbors. Indeed, by objective measures, interfaith relations are generally good. That said, a spate of recent religious incidents has caused some disquiet on both sides and raised concerns that Christian-Muslim relations cannot perhaps be taken for granted. First, during 2006, at least three Quran "desecration" incidents occurred at Ethiopian universities where pages from the Quran were found in university restrooms, prompting an outraged, although peaceful, reaction from Muslims. Local authorities hastened to conduct investigations and the incidents eventually blew over.

¶21. (C) More significantly, in late 2006 several deadly religious conflicts occurred in Oromiya Region (described extensively in Ref C), initially caused by perceived disrespect for a mosque by Christians observing Meskal celebrations and eventually resulting in violent tit-for-tat encounters. At least six people were hacked to death with machetes, and churches and huts burned. Following these incidents, members of the Muslim and Christian communities, particularly at the local level, hastened to call for tolerance and issued a joint Interfaith Communique urging peace and

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reconciliation. Interestingly, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church reluctantly and belatedly joined these efforts after initially strongly calling for authorities to mete out severe punishment to the Muslim offenders -- whom the Church squarely blamed for the incident. Only later did the Church join other Christian and Muslim leaders (including the EAISC) in calls for reconciliation.

CONCLUSION: NO RELIGIOUS SPLIT LIKELY--FOR NOW--BUT ETHIOPIA RELUCTANT TO CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITY

¶22. (C) Calls in December by the Somali Council of Islamic Courts (CIC for "jihad" against Ethiopia have further contributed to feelings that Ethiopian Christians and Muslims might not share the same interests. Generally, observers comment that the recent Muslim-Christian incidents are not unprecedented but are greater in scope and number than seen in the past. Both communities seem determined to characterize events as isolated and atypical while simultaneously quietly worrying that they might portend a new and more confrontational trend. Prime Minister Meles himself commented to Post a number of years ago that, in his mind the greatest threat to Ethiopia was a nation split along religious lines. That said, the possibility, however distant, of confrontational Muslim-Christian relations represents a specter that few in Ethiopia--including the GOE--wish to discuss. For example, President Girma himself recently quietly pressured a prominent Christian leader not to participate in a Mission-organized forum on interfaith tolerance, apparently deeply uncomfortable with open discussion of such a sensitive subject. Reaction to the violence in Oromiya suggests that both communities and the government will generally respond quickly to isolated incidents but it remains to be seen if they will engage in frank dialogue if or when a more systemic problem emerges.

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